Quakers Bar Pressure to Expel Nixon

By Marjorie Hyer 10/24/73
Washington Post Staff Writer

Despite heavy pressures to strip President Nixon of his Quakerism, the East Whittier (Calif.) Friends Church will continue to consider him an "active member", the church's pastor has pledged.

Dismayed by the gap they see between Quaker principles and Mr. Nixon's performance in such areas as the Indochina war and the Watergate scandals, Friends meetings and individuals around the country have urged that the President be asked to resign his affiliation with the Society of Friends.

T. Eugene Coffin, minister of the East Whittier church, where the President has been a lifelong member, acknowledged in a telephone interview that the church's Committee on Ministry and Council has discussed the matter.

"But on no instance did we consider taking such a step," he said.

Membership in the Society of Friends is controlled by the local Friends meeting or church with which an individual is affiliated. There is no larger body in Quakerism with the power to force a local meeting to "disown" a member.

Coffin conceded that the East Whittier church has received "numerous" communications from other Friends meeting challenging Mr. Nixon's continued membership in the Society of Friends in the light of his apparent disregard for Quaker principles.

It was these expressions of concern from Friends elsewhere, he said, that prompted formal consideration of the President's membership.

"Many of our Friends meetings have been very concerned about (Mr. Nixon's) conduct of the war, about the bonbing," he said.

The disclosures that emerged during the Watergate hearings prompted further expressions of concern Coffin said.

"They kept writing us saying: 'Isn't this another demonstration of the fact you should consider asking him to resign?' "

But the East Whittier church committee concluded that such a course of action would not be the "Christian" thing to do.

"We felt that the real issue was our responsibility to him as a man, "the pastor said.

The East Whittier church is one of a group of West Coast Friends congregations more evangelical in outlook than Friends Meetings in the East and somewhat less preoccupied with social issues.

While they respect the historic pacifist tradition of the Society of Friends, there is less tendency in the East Whittier church to apply it to the contemporary scene.

In contrast, many East Coast Friends have interpreted the Society's peace testimony as a directive to oppose U.S. involvement in Indochina.

These Friends have been particularly resentful of the President's repeated references to his own Quakerism as he pursues policies they see as distinctly unQuakerly.

Their irritation is compounded by the fact that for all Mr. Nixon's rhetoric about Quakerism, he has not worked at it for most of his adult life.

Opal Gooden, former clerk of the Florida Avenue Friends Meeting here, voiced the annoyance some Friends feel for the President.

Asked if Mr. Nixon had ever attended the meeting here, she replied: "He came once when he was a freshman Congressman to speak on a panel of some kind.'

"He's never been to a meeting for worship. He's never sent his children to Friends' schools. He's never contributed a penny to the meeting."

She summed up the situation during his years as President: "He's been a great embarrassment to us."

Mr. Nixon has shown little more interest in the East Whitter Friends Church.

The East Whittier pastor conceded that the last time the President attended that church was for his mother's funeral in 1968.

Nevertheless he is considered an "active member" of the East Whittier Church.

"I do believe he will attend" in the future, Coffin said. "He's told me he would."

Coffin enjoys his designation as "the President's pastor" even though Mr. Nixon has not been inside the church in the four years the minister has served it.

"But I preached for him at the White House," Coffin said, referring to the private church services the President prefers.

Earlier this year the Friends Journal, published in Philadelphia, expressed the frustration of many Friends in an editorial which asked "whether the time has not come when Friends must consider taking action beyond vigils and letters and pleas and prayers.

"Perhaps there should be a national meeting (of Friends) to consider the case of Richard Nixon's actions as they relate to those basic Quaker principles (against war).

"We hesitate to join some Friends in suggesting that Richard Nixon's membership in the Society be withdrawn, but we wonder if he should not be asked to resign as a Friend."

James Lenhart, editor of the Journal and author of the editorial, said that the proposal evoked "the largest response from Quaker readership in recen history," with the sentiment running about three to one in agreement with the resignation suggestion.